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Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Arts and Consciousness

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The arts have traditionally served a wide range of social functions, from the utilitarian, political, and entertaining, to the sacred, ritualistic, and religious. As such, the arts have always been an integral vehicle of transpersonal development, by uncovering the unconscious and raising consciousness, preserving cultures, and propelling global transformation.

Art as *primary instinct* activates all the senses, our visceral response and intellect; as a language, it *compels participation* and is often rich in tacit and explicit symbolism. Art forms the transition between nature and culture; it is life giving and life enhancing to individuals and societies (Jung, 1973). Ellen Dissanayake (e.g., 1979, 2003, 2013), an anthropologist and longtime researcher of art as a human behavior—an action rather than object—proposed that when physical survival is not at stake, humans engage in “shaping and embellishing the experienced, sensed, and imagined aspects of ordinary life to make them more-than-ordinary” (1979, p. 27). Dissanayake has coined the term *Homo Aestheticus* to denote this human predisposition: an orientation toward *artification* across the lifespan—accompanying child-play as well as elders spiritual ceremonies. Imaginative expression has been intrinsic to our species throughout the history of humanity, from cave paintings, ceremonial artifacts, indigenous rituals, and religious art, to street graffiti, art psychotherapy, art-based research, gallery exhibits, staged performances, and electronic media.

This Special Topic Section of IJTS pays homage to the arts as vehicle and medium of consciousness in the gathering of 20 articles, including original research, philosophical pieces, images of artworks, poetry, and book reviews. The contributions are compiled as if in conversation with one another, philosophy and expression meet formal research—a discourse that seems to echo a shared conviction among these transpersonal scholar-artists, expressing the importance of the arts as agents of personal and collective consciousness, transformation, and healing. John Clammer, whose recent book *Art,*

Culture and International Development (2015) is cogently reviewed by Judy Schavrien (p. 214), eloquently said:

The imaginary is not simply fantasy, although fantasy plays a very important part in our emotional and psychic lives as attested by many cultural forms from fairy tales and myths or utopias and science fiction, it is also the means by which we try out ideas before imposing them on the world, in which we explore alternatives, express our deepest longings for the kind of societies and relationships in which we think we would like to live, and through which we constantly surprise ourselves with fresh ideas, symbols and images that seem to arise from some unknown depth (as indeed they do). The arts are the channeling of these processes in such a way that they become public, and as such potential tools for the transformation of society in ways that we consider desirable. (Clammer, 2015, p. 150)

Schavrien points out in her review that Clammer’s success in arguing that the arts are a powerful vehicle of global development is inseparable from his ability to address issues of public debate, including ecology, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation. The visual arts, film, theatre, music, dance, architecture, poetry, and fiction writing have the potential to generate pluralistic, diverse, continually evolving forms of expression, meaning-making, and public movement, which Clammer calls *visual justice*, toward change in the face of an otherwise economics-driven development and destruction.

Well before art becomes a public agent of transformation, however, a seldom-examined relationship unfolds intimately (albeit often tumultuously) between artist and creative source. In “The Lost Dialogue of Artists: Negotiating the Conjuring of Art,” Diane Meyer examines this creative-process intrinsic dialogue, which profoundly shapes the artist and artwork—an “interplay and negotiation within the gestation of the artwork in a uniquely individual language that can never be fully revealed, translated, or understood by a viewer” (p. 70).

In her analysis of this complex dynamics of creative inspiration—the artist's wrestling with medium and Spirit—Meyer's article rigorously interweaves scholarship with an insider's view of an experienced artist.

Following is a glimpse into Meyer's own creative process, in her reflective artist-statement "Connecting to the Sacred Through Contemplative Gaze," which is accompanied by two images of her large watercolor paintings. Meyer engages in a conversation with the Masters, retracing their steps, and integrating reminiscent subject matters, symbolism, colors, and gestures into her own artwork. She writes: "By doing so, I experienced a broader awareness and a deeper sense of the artist and the painting that became accessible to me, and served to inform my own artistic responses. I then allowed my own symbols to play into the work as completion or resolution of the overall exchange" (p. 83).

The interplay of artist, process, medium, and inspiration is uniquely manifested in other artist-scholar contributions to the journal. Although these contributors present diverse orientations toward expanded consciousness, the roots of their creative process similarly tap into unconscious processes, intuition, and the body. In "Clay as a Spiritual Practice," Kat McIver describes how she yields to her medium and connects with a subtle level of body awareness that guides her work as a sculptor. With attention to synchronicities and trust in "the light within" (p. 88), McIver follows an expressive process, which is inextricable from her spiritual development. A ceramic sculptor, McIver's three-dimensional pieces embody, sometimes "prefigure" her deep connection with God. Synchronicities alert her to the sculptures' teachings, and by reflecting on the insight they invoke, she then embodies the figures and embraces the seminal knowing that tacitly guided the creation of her artworks all along.

Jill Mellick discloses how a night-dream propelled her creation of a series of mixed-media. Mellick's reflective statement, "Japan Dreaming," accompanies the images of two pieces from this series, articulating some of the nuances of how her experimental use of materials was dictated by her response to the aftermath of devastating natural disasters in Japan and Australia. Mellick's deep connection to these cultures guided her process from within, and was given form through actions such as "burning, tearing, wrapping, breaking, mending, drenching, gluing, cutting, pulling, casting aside, destroying, smudging, sketching, tying, binding, wrapping, knotting" (p. 90). She, too,

identifies how the artist, subject matter, and process are integral and inseparable.

Ellen Questel's "Alchemy Series," from which she has selected two images for this journal, is an example for the long incubation of images as first encountered by the artist in dreams and meditation, and later discovered in her research into Jung's theory of archetypes and his conceptualization of alchemy "as a metaphor for psychic transformation" (p. 94). Themes such as "spirit in nature; microcosms; stages of differentiation and transformation in nature; and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth" (p. 94) guided Questel in the conception and birth of this series. Here, as well, subject matter, process, and medium all correspond. Questel describes her process as alchemical; her use of medium is exploratory and intuitive, and her images are aptly obscure and enigmatic.

Micah Linton, a professional graphic artist and illustrator, applies his well-honed skills to a personal and scholarly interest in mystical experiences and the symbolic and archetypal representations he creates in their wake. His contribution to this issue, "Altered States of Consciousness and Creative Expression," includes the images of two artworks presented through the lenses of three altered states phenomena: hypnagogia, synesthesia, and active imagination. He concludes that altered states of consciousness and the visual expression he gives to these experiences have served as catalyst in his "journey of self-discovery" (p. 102).

Creative expression as container and facilitator for the experiences of *presence* appears in Andrée Salom's "The Art of Observation and Experience" (p. 103). Salom discusses the potential embedded within art making as a mindfulness practice. She observes how the art object holds the content of personal expression while serving as witness-consciousness. Art making as a practice of *watching-experiencing*—a term coined by John Pendergast to denote a meditative state of observing with feeling—facilitates intentional awareness of the present moment with nonattachment that also guards against alienation. By mirroring inner-experiences, the artwork mitigates the tendency in mindfulness practices to over-identify with the potentially overwhelming content of awareness, or over-detach as if a bystander. Salom draws on Vedic and Buddhist philosophies of mindfulness, her experiences of immersion and flow in the process of art making, as well as her professional practice as expressive therapist. She identifies methods of creative expression that hold both content and observation.

Lisa Herman in "Transpersonal Space/Time Through the Arts" philosophically and experientially considers how the expressive arts facilitate entry into, and then directly embody a real and physical felt-sense of transpersonal space/time as *liminal*. According to Herman, art making is transpersonal when experienced as the threshold of consciousness—in-between known and unknown, the ordinary and extraordinary, paradoxically complex and simple, implicitly ordered and disordered, divine and evil (p. 112). Beginning with a vivid and poetic conceptualization of this construct and reflection on her work as an expressive arts therapist, Herman ultimately invites the reader to witness her own transformational creative-writing and experience of theatre performance as examples for embodied inquiry of transpersonal *shadow* through the arts.

Consciousness of dark and light permeates the poetry of Judy Todd and Diana Raab. In "Poetry and Nature," Todd's poem "Vernal Dream" (p. 123) revels in the immense but fleeting quality of nature's beauty. Awareness, memory, fierce honesty, and deep grief for the destruction and loss of our natural world are captured in "That Morning" (p. 124). Todd's clear, reflective statement adds to the symbolism of her poetic voice, as she invites the reader to join her adventurous and creative journey of awareness, and to help awaken humanity from the slumber of irreverence toward our planet and its inhabitants.

In "Poetry and Consciousness," Raab employs this evocative medium as the catalyst of consciousness development. Her poems share transformative insight, encapsulated in moments from her everyday life. In "I'm Wondering" (p. 125) she shares a moving observation, from her travels to Zimbabwe, of what connects us as humans; whereas "Panoramic Ocean" (p. 125) unveils her expanded consciousness and focused perspective on life, while gazing at the Pacific from her seat in an oceanside restaurant. Raab's poems and reflections blur the dichotomy of personal and universal, poverty and affluence, mundane and sacred, as these dimensions of existence seem to nestle within each other in her poems, as raw, lived experiences.

Contributing to the body of art-based transpersonal research are the following six articles in this issue, including "Mystical Poetry and Imagination" (Netzer); "Exploring Soul-Loss Through Art-Based Research" (Linder); "Singing and Participatory Spirituality" and "Photo Reverie: Creative-Synthesis in Intuitive Inquiry" (both by Freinkel);

"Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Mediation" (Newton); and "Songwriting as Transpersonal Practice" (Beech).

Dorit Netzer returns to her 2008 dissertation *Mystical Poetry and Imagination* with a deepened understanding of her inquiry topic, process, and findings, which 7 years later continue to reverberate through her personal and professional applications of imagery in healing and spiritual transformation. The original study examined the experience of participants' responses to the images encapsulated in mystical poems via mental imagery, creative expression, and embodied writing as a way to explore *spiritual freedom*. The article weaves review of the study, as well as poetry and artwork that best clarify its constructs, data, and hermeneutic findings. Central to the outcome of this study is Netzer's development of an approach to gathering and analysis of non-verbal data she named *imaginal resonance*, which requires to "temporarily put aside discursive thought or logic, intentionally activate the imagination, paying attention to inwardly felt sensations and expressing self-awareness in creative ways" (p. 130). The compatibility of topic and method has resulted in facilitating "diverse imaginal responses to the mystical poems, and a humbling recognition of how transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom is so readily accessible yet remarkably ephemeral" (p. 139).

Jacqui Linder focuses her article, "Exploring Soul Loss Through Arts-Based Research" (p. 143), on one aspect of her intuitive inquiry. Acknowledging her own healing through creative expression, from childhood psychological trauma, Linder's dissertation study included data gathered via concurrent mandala drawings (by participants and researcher) subsequent to semi-structured interviews. Drawing within a circle, served to visually contain the outpouring of participants' verbal recollections of their childhood sexual abuse trauma and recovery, as well as the researcher's response to their sharing. Linder observes that these images facilitated the deepest insight into the psychospiritual impact of sexual abuse, beyond what she gleaned from the participants' verbal disclosure. Her participatory approach to the interpretation of the mandala images was guided by *imaginal resonance*, an approach to the gathering and analysis of nonverbal data (as also discussed by Netzer in this issue). Linder reflects that drawing side-by-side her participants was intriguing and, at times, overwhelming, since she could not anticipate the nature of either her or the participants' depiction of the trauma as image. The imaginal resonance structured process of responding to

these spontaneous, and unanticipated images in their own embodied and intuitive language, ensured the preservation of the power to visually communicate the indescribable aspects of the trauma and soul-loss, as well as open channels to express courage and hope.

Also an intuitive inquiry, Paul Freinkel's "Singing and Participatory Spirituality" (p. 151) presents select findings with vivid depictions that validate key elements of the participatory revisioning of transpersonal theory. Freinkel studied the psycho-spiritual growth and transformation of classically trained, accomplished singers, uncovering the spiritual dimensions of their singing careers. His dissertation uncovered the developmental nature of singing as a vehicle of participatory spirituality and transpersonal development through themes such as connection, embodied knowing, heart-felt and soulful relationships with community and the physical environment.

Following is Freinkel's creative synthesis, which he titles "Photo Reverie" (p. 166). The images and contemplative poetry that accompanies them amplify the findings of his "Singing and Participatory Spirituality" research. Like the discovery and transformation of the researcher's lenses of understanding in an intuitive inquiry, a creative synthesis presents itself in a language familiar to the researcher, and calls for illumination of tacit knowing. In this case, Freinkel draws on his longtime fascination with the photographic (light-painted) images of waterfalls and other elements in nature, and his passion for singing as a spiritual practice. Freinkel describes the research context for this creative synthesis and his process of conceiving it; he then allows the images and poetry to speak for themselves, inviting the reader to engage with them in connection with his inquiry findings, as well as for their own integral expression.

Subjective perception of musical creativity is explored by John Newton in "Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Meditation" (p. 171), where he inquires about the experience of three musicians (singer/songwriters/composers) new to mindfulness meditation (MM). As part of the study, each participant had undergone a 4-week mindfulness training by Kabat-Zinn, involving two 40-minute recorded MM sessions a week. Newton began the study with a group interview, to better understand the social aspect of creativity in collaborative performance; he then conducted pre- and post-training individual interviews, to emphasize the validity of participants' subjective experiences. Qualities such as enhanced focus,

awareness, non-attachment, and non-striving appeared to have shifted participants' experience and perception of their creative engagement with music, thus adding a transpersonal dimension to their structured/methodical and unstructured/expressive relationship with music.

The subjective experience of sharing self through song is the topic of Hillary Beech's article "Songwriting and Transformation" (p. 186). This heuristic inquiry resulted in a wide range of themes indicative of participants' connection with others through expression, communication, sharing of oneself, and making a difference through songwriting. Personal growth and wellbeing were also among the major findings, validating models of transformation in the expressive-arts literature, which emphasize the interconnection between artist and audience, in this case a co-created mutual transformation of songwriter and listener.

An unorthodox, yet thought provoking approach to art-informed inquiry is proposed by Geri Lipschultz in "Of the World that Freely Offers Itself: An Exploration of Writerly/Artistic Rituals" (p. 201). She takes a meandering, at times wittily anarchic, soul-searching route to inquire about writers' and artists' rituals, working habits, and relationships with the muse. Her essay challenges the conventions of analytical research, and demonstrates that inquiry can intimately inform when lyrical. Readers might be moved to wonder about their own relationship with the muse and ask similar questions of themselves.

Judy Schavrien is direct and probing in her article "Transpersonal Art—Does it Bite?" Her artwork is exemplary in accompanying a penetrating question—does "political perspective and content enrich transpersonal art and studies?" (p. 210). Schavrien vigorously reopens a longstanding, but often-neglected debate in transpersonal circles, that of spiritual bypassing or pseudo transcendence, while the imminent, socio-political concerns of humanity are sorely neglected. By asking this very question of herself as a contemporary artist-scholar, Schavrien exercises transcendence of rhetoric through her art making, and demonstrates that the transpersonal is political and can be creatively enacted.

We close this issue with Jessica Bockler's review of an edited book by Saphira Linden, *The Heart and Soul of Psychotherapy: A Transpersonal Approach Through Theater Arts* (p. 218)—a thick volume of essays (42 chapters) gathered from 40 expert practitioners who incorporate creative expression into their respective therapeutic

practices, with emphasis on the transpersonal dimensions of their approaches to healing and spirituality. Bockler's review provides a thorough introduction to Linden's book, concluding with the remark that "any arts, social care or health practitioner who feels drawn to explore a transpersonal approach to creative practice will find this book a valuable and inspiring resource" (p. 222).

I hope that the articles and images selected for this special topic issue and the underlying discourse among them will inspire further discussions regarding the role of the arts in individual lives and societies at large through the variety of lenses suggested herein, leading to further research and stronger ties between the arts and transpersonal studies.

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